

Contest

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First, the teams had to prepare a three-course meal. They had 15 minutes to prep their stations, two hours to cook, and fifteen minutes to plate. The plated dishes were then delivered to the panel of judges waiting to critique their work.

Nothing was allowed to be plated early, and the delivery of the dishes had to align with each team's assigned presentation time. Anything that arrived in front of the judges late was penalized. Each dish had to be plated four times - one of each of the judges, and one for a display table on the second floor of the dining hall.

After a break, the teams began round two. A buffet-style dish to serve 10 had to be prepared and plated, and then the same dish had to be rearranged into an individually-plated entree. The teams were split into two sets of assigned times, to avoid a traffic jam at the serving station.

Once the dishes were all delivered to the serving station, everyone got a chance to relax and enjoy the food they had prepared together as the judges deliberated and calculated scores.

A big part of the competition's challenge was that no team was allowed to use ovens, fryers, stovetops, or any other major appliances to cook their food. Everything had to be prepared using 4-butane burners to do all the cooking. The only exception was for pastries or baked goods, which were allowed the use of ovens and freezers. This twist was designed to level the playing field, so that every team was using the exact same equipment, and to test the chefs' skills.

"You have to be on your game," said Mark Miller, director of dining services at Skidmore. "This really challenges the chefs."

"It's really good today," said floor judge Michael Morgan. "All the chefs had



The Tufts University team is hard at work during the competition.



The Williams College team gets to work on the buffet challenge.



The SUNY Geneseo team gets to work on the buffet challenge.

a challenge of using only burners to cook, so they really had to plan their menus around that factor. All the judges are chefs, so we empathize with them."

Eight of the nine teams represented dining services staff from different colleges: Skidmore College, SUNY Albany, Williams College (Williamstown, MA), Cornell University, SUNY Geneseo, Saint Lawrence College, SUNY Cobleskill, and Tufts University (Medford, MA). The ninth team was from Bonnie Briar, a country club in Larchmont.

"The competition is great for employee morale," Miller said. "They get really excited for the competition, and we get new menu ideas from it every year."

This is the ninth year that Skidmore has hosted the ACF competition. The college has won gold medals for six of those years.

Competition scores were



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From left: ACF competition judges Victor Sommo (lead judge), Dale Miller, and Walter Zuromski. At far right, competition business manager Pat Girard computes scores.



Taking a lunch break in between competition rounds.



The Bonnie Briar country club team goes to work on the buffet challenge.

measured on a points scale, with a range of scores that would qualify a team for bronze, silver, and gold medals. Scoring was based off of a possible 100 total points.

The idea behind the point range method of scoring is that the teams were not competing against each other, but rather competing against the system to see how high they could get their scores. A high score was by no means an easy feat.

Every aspect of the teams' work was judged.



The SUNY Cobleskill team is hard at work during the competition.

Separate from the panel of three judges critiquing the finished plates put in front of them was a pair of floor judges who would watch each team and critique their work in the kitchen. Everything from taste, color, portion size, balance, knife skills, sanitation, organization, cooking techniques, and teamwork were put to the test.

"I think it's a great learning experience for everyone," said Kathleen Van Twyver, chef manager at Saint Lawrence College. "It's fun for them to do



The Saint Lawrence team starts to plate up.



The Skidmore team starts plating food.



The SUNY Albany (left) and Cornell University (right) teams start work on the buffet challenge.

something that's not dining hall service. The educational programs that came before the competition are great too."

"It's very nerve-racking," added chef Marabeth Peets, who wasn't competing this year, but there to support her peers. "You don't want to mess up and you want the judges to like your work. The whole experience is a great learning tool."

The competition was also a learning tool for the Culinary Arts students at BOCES CTE, who help out in the competition every year. This year, under the guidance of chef Celeste David, the students carried the plated food on trays to the judges and the presentation area and brought empty trays back to the work stations. They also worked the front of the house at Thursday's reception and lunch.

"I love it; I can't wait for next year. It helps to teach us pacing and responsibility," junior student Raven

Kitchen said.

"It's so much fun," senior student Max Fredette agreed. "You get to see so much, things like working together and timing. This helps me to get ready for when I'm an adult."

Chef David pointed out how helping at an event like this helps the students to understand the full picture of a culinary career. It's not just cooking in the kitchen, it's also about manners, time management, hospitality, confidence, and knowing every role in food service from front of the house to back of the house to washing dishes.

"It's amazing to see how far college dining has come," commented apprentice judge John Noble Masi. "I attend other competitions, and this is one of the best-run in the country."

In true "Skidmore gets the whole community involved" fashion, the event was open to the public for observation. Children from the Greenberg Child Care Center on campus came by for a visit, wearing decorated chef's hats, to cheer everyone on.

Over at Skidmore's station, Executive Chef Jim Rose watched the team at work.

"I think our team's going to do very well," he said. "I'm very proud of them. It's not just about winning that gold medal - it's team-building skills, and what they're going to walk away with today is priceless."

Rose pointed out that the Skidmore team is never comprised of the best of the best. There is always at least one person on the team who is newer and less experienced, and team selection is always done by sign up. It gives everyone on the Skidmore dining services staff an opportunity to learn from the unique experiences of the ACF competition.

At press time, judging of the competition was not yet complete. Results, including scores and medal counts, will be published in a future edition of The Saratogian.